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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 011548

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ANDEAN SECURITY CONFERENCE COLOMBIA SCENESETTER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Milton K. Drucker, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1.(C) With USG assistance, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has made great strides in fighting drug trafficking and terrorism. The security forces have initiated a nation-wide, multi-phased campaign to capture or kill key FARC leaders, moved against the FARC in its rural strongholds, and reestablished a presence in the country's 1,098 municipalities. Inter-service and civil-military cooperation and Colombia's human rights record, although imperfect, are improving. Uribe's support in Congress has dampened since he took office but he has managed to push through some important legislation. Three U.S. citizens have been held hostage by the FARC for over 20 months now. Their safe recovery continues to be one of our top priorities. End Summary.

URIBE IS SHOWING RESULTS

12. (SBU) Assistance to Colombia is premised on combating the interrelated issues of drug trafficking and terrorism and includes training, material aid, and guidance to the security forces and other institutions. President Uribe and Colombian Minister of Defense (MOD) Jorge Alberto Uribe (not related) have characterized U.S. assistance as key to the GOC's "Democratic Security Policy" and acknowledged the United States as Colombia's most important ally. More than halfway through his four-year term, Uribe has made the country safer and more stable economically by implementing the following strategies to promote security and economic recovery:

-- Plan Patriota: The military's multi-phased, joint campaign to re-establish control over national territory and cripple the FARC entered its second major stage (2B) in February 2004, an approximately 18 to 24 month-long phase to target FARC-dominated regions in remote, tropical, southeastern Colombia. The security forces have gained control over numerous FARC mobility nodes and reporting indicates that the FARC are feeling the effects of the campaign. Phase 2B is logistically complex and supply shortages have caused setbacks. The government will need to establish a permanent presence in newly occupied territory to prevent the FARC from returning. The U.S. MILGRP has Planning and Assistance Training Teams (PATTs) to assist Plan Patriota. During the campaign's first phase (2A) in 2003, the military dealt the FARC heavy blows in Cundinamarca Department, which surrounds Bogota, killing important mid-level commanders and destroying the FARC's 22nd Front and several special mobile columns.

-- State Presence Established Nationwide: Upon taking office, Uribe pledged to establish a permanent security force presence in the 158 municipalities (equivalent to U.S. counties) that lacked a military or police garrison. As of January 4, all 1,098 municipalities had a police presence. The USG facilitated this effort by training numerous police units and building hardened police stations. Police commanders have reported that most communities have welcomed the new presence and that it has boosted the economy by providing safe transportation and tourist protection.

-- AUC: The country's largest paramilitary group declared a unilateral cease-fire in November 2002; formal peace talks, including an agreement to begin demobilizing, began in July 2003; and 19 senior AUC commanders with several hundred bodyguards concentrated in a 12 x 12 mile zone surrounded by police and military in June 2004. Two small-scale demobilizations occurred in late 2003 and AUC violence continues at a comparatively low level. The OAS is verifying the peace process. On October 7, paramilitary leaders pledged to demobilize between 3,000 and 4,000 of their members between November 3 and the end of 2004. The GOC remains committed to a transparent, legitimate peace process and has made it clear that extradition is a non-negotiable issue and will not hinder any U.S. extradition petitions.

-- U.S. Assistance to Deserters, Demobilized: After a "no objection" ruling was issued by the Department of Justice in August, the U.S. has been able to support financially the child combatant program. The U.S. is now the largest contributor to the program. Justice is still working on a

legal opinion on U.S. funding for the broader reinsertion program in light of provisions of the Patriot Act barring aid to members of terrorist groups.

-- Drug Eradication On Schedule to Meet Goals: For coca, 130,000 hectares have been sprayed and 12,000 hectares eradicated manually. We have sprayed 3,000 hectares of opium poppy and eradicated another 1,200 manually. Manual eradication remains problematic, however, as is spraying in parks. The Council of State recently ruled to reinstate the aerial spray program following a brief suspension based on allegations of damage to health and environment by glyphosate. However, ongoing appeals still threaten the process.

-- Drug Interdiction: We are heading for records in air, land, and sea interdiction; i.e., more than 140 tons have been seized. There is substantial interest here about the Brazilian air interdiction program and the possibility of U.S. cooperation with it.

13. (C) Almost a year ago, Uribe named a new MOD and high command with an eye toward improving cooperation and rewarding operational performers. Uribe and his security team have emphasized that inter-service and civil-military cooperation and intelligence-based operations are key to success. Nevertheless, long-standing institutional rivalries are an on-going challenge. Changes to the high command, possibly including a new Armed Forces Commander and Army Commander, are expected in December. We enjoy excellent relations with MOD Uribe, Navy Commander Admiral Soto, and Air Force Commander General Lesmez. Our ties with Armed Forces Commander General Ospina and Army Commander General Carreno, while mostly good, are sometimes strained.

INTERNAL POLITICS

14. (C) Executive-legislative relations have been tense. Uribe's presidential reelection initiative, however, has passed its eight required debates, and only the Plenary vote remains. Most observers are guardedly optimistic about its passage. The mandatory review by the Constitutional Court that will follow is less certain. The Administration's pension reforms and a new tax on certain basic food products -- controversial proposals that have already provoked negative reactions from members of Congress -- face tougher sledding. The Uribe administration and several Congressmen are working to revamp and reintroduce a "Justice and Reparations" bill -- which would allow the GOC to issue alternate penalties and reparations requirements on demobilizing paramilitaries -- before the current legislative session closes.

MULTILATERAL ISSUES

15. (C) The GOC consistently votes for U.S.-supported candidates for multilateral boards and commissions. However, on Middle East issues, in particular Israeli-Palestinian matters, the GOC seldom supports our position. The GOC was pleased with the United Nations Human Rights Commission (CHR) Chairman's Statement on Colombia and has expressed appreciation for our support. We are skeptical that the GOC will take a stronger position on the crisis of democracy in Venezuela. Recent border incidents have contributed to Uribe's careful diplomacy with Hugo Chavez. Colombia is similarly reluctant to speak out against Cuba.

GOC Generally Attuned to Human Rights

16. (C) The GOC maintains an active human rights dialogue with NGOs, the United Nations, and foreign governments. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police, and the Embassy vets units that receive USG assistance. The State Department's 2003 Human Rights Report on Colombia noted that GOC efforts to improve security had led to major improvements in key human rights and violence indicators. For example, homicides fell by 20 percent, kidnappings by 30 percent, and forced displacements by 49 percent in 2003. Less than 2 percent of human rights violations are attributable to government security forces. However, most Colombian NGOs remain severely critical of the GOC. Recent missteps by the armed forces, such a police-military clash in Narino Department (Guaitarilla), the murder of three trade unionists in Arauca, and the mysterious circumstances surrounding the killing of a family of five by the Army in rural Tolima Department (Cajamarca), show a need for further improvement in respect for human rights by the security forces.

FARC Continues to Hold U.S. Citizens Hostage

17. (C) In February 2003, a DOD plane carrying four USG contractors and a Colombian military representative crashed in FARC-controlled territory in southern Colombia. The FARC killed one of the U.S. contractors and the Colombian and took the other three U.S. citizens hostage. We believe they are being held in a remote, heavily forested region the FARC has long controlled and to which the Colombian military has little access. Since the contractors were kidnapped, we have worked closely with the GOC to track all leads that could reveal their location. President Uribe has personally pledged GOC cooperation and support in any effort to rescue the hostages. As part of our efforts to secure their recovery, we initiated the Rewards for Justice Program, which offers up to USD five million in exchange for information leading to the capture of FARC commanders or other individuals involved in the kidnapping. President Uribe has also given personal assurances that he would insist the U.S. hostages be included in any "humanitarian exchange" with the FARC.

Economic Issues

18. (U) In the third quarter of 2004, Colombia's macroeconomic forecast showed strong growth in multiple areas. Increased exports, a strong peso, and low inflation led the way and helped to decrease the debt and increase investment. Foreign Direct Investment for 2004 is currently at a five year high. While the government is optimistic, many analysts worry that unemployment remains high and fiscal reforms have not been passed through Congress. These factors make the long-term outlook less clear.

19. (U) The fifth round of FTA talks finished in Guayaquil, Ecuador on October 29. Slow movement overall with intellectual property and agriculture continue to be major issues, specifically patents, medications, agricultural subsidies and access to genetic resources. To increase public awareness, Colombian lawmakers have begun a robust FTA outreach program to compliment other FTA forums sponsored by the GOC with assistance from USAID.

110. (U) The central bank has taken advantage of a strong peso by purchasing additional reserves and paying off its dollar denominated debt. Analysts expect that if the peso ends December at its current level (instead of the 2,900 that the government had originally forecast) the GOC will save CP 620 billion (238 million USD) in debt servicing. Recently, the central bank has been purchasing dollars in order to curb the appreciation of the peso.
DRUCKER